

# How should we worship God?

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Our theme this evening is very simply: How should we worship God?

The First Commandment tells us who we should worship. This Second Commandment deals with how we should worship that God.

## **1. It Does Matter.**

It matters how we worship God. This basic point needs to be underlined in our present day that it does matter how we worship God. The reference to God's jealousy in verse five, alone, ought to alert us to the fact that the worship of God and how we worship God does matter.

Church history, of course, is strewn with conflict over the question of how God is to be worshipped. We might think it was much ado about nothing, but this commandment indicates that this is not the case, that it does matter how we worship God. And yet the average professing Christian spends more time thinking about what they ought to wear to some great social gathering than they do about how they should worship God and what is pleasing to God in his own worship.

In Malachi chapter one and verse eight the Lord remonstrates in Israel and he says at verse seven.

Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.<sup>1</sup>

There the Lord is saying that they wouldn't even treat a human governor the way they were treating him and he is the almighty God.

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<sup>1</sup> Malachi 1:7-8

And it is true that many who profess the name of Christ would not treat some human being, some mere man of importance the way they treat God, and they give no thought to whether what they do as worship is, in fact, pleasing to God.

Behind this is the assumption that it doesn't really matter. And behind the assumption that it doesn't really matter is a low view of God. And behind that is the idea that in worshipping God we are doing God a favor, that it is not something we are obliged to do, but we really do it as a favor to God or to some how do a deal with God that if we worship him, then he will somehow return the favor.

Psalm 50 verse eight.

I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt offerings, to have been continually before me. I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High:<sup>2</sup>

Now there God is rebuking this idea that somehow he was in need of them and this idea that they were doing God a favor in the Old Testament forms of worship, the offering of sacrifice.

And the current idea that worship is a matter of self expression is utterly wrong. Worship is not a matter of self expression and sincerity is not all that matters. True love to God will show itself in a sincere desire to find out what worship is acceptable to him. If we love God then we will want to know and to find out what worship is acceptable to him. And if we don't want to know that, then it is because we don't love God, isn't it?

## **2. God Decides.**

The text says, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image."<sup>3</sup> Later on in the book of Exodus God told Israel what they must do in his worship. Here he tells them, very simply, what they must not do, that is, make graven images.

There is a basic question here. Do we acknowledge God's right to tell us how to worship him? Do we, in our hearts own the fact that God himself has the right to tell us how to worship? Because if we do not own his authority at this point, how can we possibly worship him at all? If we don't acknowledge that God has the right to tell us how to worship, then how can we possibly worship him? A God who does not have the authority to tell us how to worship is no God at all. If God has no authority at this point he has no authority at all.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 50:8-14

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:4

Just think of the audacity of it, that we should engage in certain activities, call it worship and never ask the question: What does God say we should do? In other words, decide how to worship God as if God didn't exist. Decide what we like doing of a religious sort and then call it worship and assume that it is acceptable to God.

To engage in what purports to be the worship of God without acknowledging God's right to tell us how to do it is a denial of God. It is a denial of the authority of God and of all that worship must entail. God decides, not you, not me, not what you like, what I like so that we tussle over what we like most and what we would like to be the ingredients of the service.

Isn't that what happens in many situations? The worship of God, or what is supposed to be the worship of God, the content of it is determined by who can push the hardest to get what they like.

What every professing Christian should be asking is: What does God say? That is what matters and nothing else matters. It is God we are meant to be worshipping after all.

### **3. God is not to be worshipped by images.**

That God is not to be worshipped by images is on the face of the text.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.<sup>4</sup>

So the text explicitly excludes images. We are not to make images nor bow down to them. This indicates that the claim that images merely represent God is not good enough. You know, the defense is sometimes made, "Well, the images are simply a help to worship. We know they are not the gods, but they represent God and they help us to worship God."

Well, they don't. They don't help anybody to worship God. They only feed the imagination. But the point is that intelligent pagans have always claimed that the images are not the god or the gods, but merely representations of them. Intelligent pagans always said that. It is not a new argument. In paganism there were always those who had little grasp of what was supposed to be taking place. They treated the gold and silver images as if it was actually a god. The more intelligent, more thinking pagans, they said, "No, it represents the god." That has always been the case.

And God condemned the worship of images whether by those who thought the images were God or those who thought the images represented God. He condemns it. "Thou

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:4-5

shalt not bow down there to.”<sup>5</sup>

And even though the image purports to represent the Lord, it is nonetheless offensive to God.

In Exodus chapter 32 and verse four and five, Exodus 32 verse four you remember that Aaron—while Moses was delayed in the mount—“He received them,” that is the gold,

...and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow is a feast to the LORD.<sup>6</sup>

So when Aaron made the golden calf he didn't say, “This is some other God.” He said, “Yes, we are using this golden calf and this represents the Lord and tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.”

Aaron tried to make the best of it. He hadn't the courage to resist the people. They wanted a golden calf. He made a golden calf and he said it is a feast to the Lord. But God detested it. And if you read the sequel you will find that God judged Israel. The fact that Aaron said it is a feast to the Lord didn't make it a feast to the Lord.

And the fact that images are used and it is professed that it is the God of the Bible who is being worshipped by means of images does not mean that it is the God of the Bible who is being worshipped and it is abominable to the Lord. And so even if we maintain that images are a help to worshipping the Lord, they are, in fact, idolatry. They don't help. As we said earlier, they don't help anyone have right views of God. The supposed help that they think they are getting from them is a help in viewing God wrongly. It helps them to think wrongly of God, not rightly because we cannot possibly accurately represent God and so they don't help real worship. They only help people think they are worshipping God when they are not. They are worshipping some man made idea of God that doesn't exist. A God represented in images is not the living and true God who is in the heavens.

And this includes images of the Lord Jesus Christ. It has been argued that images of Christ are lawful for this reason. The Lord Jesus Christ, we know from the Scriptures, was God become man, God manifested in the flesh. He is God and man in two distinct natures, but one person forever. And the argument runs like this. Images of Christ are not images of his divine nature, but of his human nature. Therefore to make an image of the human form of Christ is not idolatry because the image is only representing his human appearance, not his divine nature.

But there is one insurmountable problem with this view and it is this. While the Lord Jesus Christ was in this world men worshipped at his human feet and offered the worship

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<sup>5</sup> See Exodus 20:5

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 32:4-5

due to a divine person because the Lord Jesus Christ is always a divine person. And yet he received worship offered to him, offered toward his human form.

Matthew chapter two and verse 11. “And when they were come into the house...”<sup>7</sup> This is the wise men, “they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him.”<sup>8</sup> They worshipped him, the infant, God manifest in the flesh. Divine worship was offered to the human form and presence of the divine Redeemer.

In Matthew chapter eight and verse two. “And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.”<sup>9</sup>

In chapter nine and verse 18. “While he spake these things unto them, behold, there came a certain ruler, and worshipped him, saying...”<sup>10</sup>

And then after his resurrection in Matthew 28 and verse nine: “And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him.”<sup>11</sup> They held him by the feet, those human feet, those feet of the true body that the Lord Jesus took to himself when he became a man. He took to himself a true body and a reasonable soul. They took hold of the feet of the human, the physical part of the human nature of the divine Redeemer and they worshipped and he did not tell them not to. He received that worship. They held the human feet of the divine Redeemer. They worshipped towards his human, physical presence and ascribed divine honor to God incarnate because he was a divine person.

Now, then, that which in its reality is fit to receive divine worship is not fit to be made an image of. If it was right to worship towards Christ in his human presence because he was a divine person, then it is wrong to attempt to make an image of that human presence of a divine person which is in its reality the legitimate object of worship. That which it is legitimate to worship in fact, an image is not to be made of it. And so such images of Christ even in his human nature are not to be made. They are not to be worshipped.

You will notice that the text doesn't simply say they weren't to worship. They were not to make them.

Verse four. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.”<sup>12</sup>

Verse five. “Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 2:11

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 8:2

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 9:18

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 28:9

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 20:4

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 20:5

They were not to make, they were not to even begin to make visual representations of God. It cannot be done without making an idol.

And all the pleas of Roman Catholicism that images are mere helps and representations are in vain. And not just Roman Catholicism but the high church party generally. The idea that they can be harmless helps to worship is untrue. They always distort and lead people to wrong ideas of God. Images of divine persons are not to be made nor worshipped.

#### **4. God is not to be worshipped in any way not appointed in his word.**

You say, “Well, all right, images, we don’t want images. But how do we decide after that? Do we just do what we like, do our own thing?”

No, we don’t. In prohibiting images God is excluding human initiative, human creativity in his worship.

We live in a day when creativity is always seen as a good thing, but it isn’t. In the worship of God creativity is a bad thing. Human invention is a bad thing.

Now, just to explain how this point has featured in Church history: At the time of the Reformation the Lutheran Churches and the Church of England, for example, they adopted what can be called normative principle. That is they said, “What Scripture prohibits must be excluded from the worship of God.” And so they excluded images and they excluded various other things. But on this view, provided something wasn’t condemned in the Scriptures, it was allowed. So the worship of God consisted of what God had appointed, plus whatever men thought to be helpful provided it was not condemned in Scripture.

The Reformed churches adopted what is known as the regulative principle. Their position was that whatever God has not appointed in worship is to be excluded. So the Lutherans said what God forbids must be kept out. The Reformed said what God has not appointed must be kept out. Which of these is the right position? Are we free to introduce things into the worship of God that Scripture doesn’t appoint, but doesn’t explicitly condemn? Or were the Reformed right? Was Calvin, Knox right? Were they right when they said whatever is not appointed must be excluded?

Well, we believe they were right and here is why. We will just go through one or two passages quite quickly. Later on in chapter 20 in this chapter that we are looking at in verse 22 we read.

And the LORD said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold. An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all

places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee. And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.<sup>14</sup>

Now there the Lord is saying they could make an altar, but they were not to lift up a tool upon it. They were not to use their initiative.

Exodus 25 and verse 40. “And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount.”<sup>15</sup>

God gave a pattern for his worship and they were to follow it.

Leviticus chapter 10 and the first three verses.

And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is it that the LORD spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.<sup>16</sup>

Now this judgment of God fell because they offered strange fire before the Lord which he commanded them not. It was the mere fact that it was unauthorized by God.

Deuteronomy chapter 12 and verse 32. “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.”<sup>17</sup> And if you look at the context, it is the worship of God. “Thou shall not add thereto, nor diminish from it.”<sup>18</sup> They were to do all that God commanded in his worship, no more and no less.

In 1 Samuel 13 and verse eight to 14—you can look it up in your own time—you will find that Saul, when he was under pressure, instead of waiting for Samuel who was authorized to offer sacrifice, he took it on his own self to offer and it was rejected of God and he was dismissed from the kingship.

In 1 Chronicles 13 verse nine to 13 we have the incident of Uzza who died before the Lord, 1 Chronicles 13 and verse nine.

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<sup>14</sup> Exodus 20:22-26

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 25:40

<sup>16</sup> Leviticus 10:1-3

<sup>17</sup> Deuteronomy 12:32

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

And when they came unto the threshingfloor of Chidon, Uzza put forth his hand to hold the ark; for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzza, and he smote him, because he put his hand to the ark: and there he died before God.<sup>19</sup>

This unauthorized putting of his hand to the ark of God is explained in chapter 15 and verse 13. “For because ye did it not at the first, the LORD our God made a breach upon us, for that we sought him not after the due order.”<sup>20</sup>

They hadn’t done it God’s way. It seemed sensible. But they hadn’t done it God’s way.

Jeremiah chapter seven and verse 31. “And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart.”<sup>21</sup>

You say, “Well, of course, human sacrifice, that was a dreadful thing to do.”

But notice the specific ground here on which God condemns it. He doesn’t condemn it because it was murder, though it was. He condemns it because, “I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart.”<sup>22</sup>

You say, “Well, that is all the Old Testament.”

So it is, but God hasn’t changed. The form of worship was changed by God, but the principle of worshiping God God’s way alone has not changed.

Matthew chapter 15 and verse nine. The Lord Jesus says, “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”<sup>23</sup> He is quoting from Isaiah 29:13.

The Lord Jesus resisted human invention in worship. That is why he collided so often with the Pharisees.

Colossians chapter two and verse 23. “Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.”<sup>24</sup>

A complicated passage, but that phrase, “will worship” what does it mean? The apostle condemns will worship. What is will worship? It is when we worship according to our

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Chronicles 13:9-10

<sup>20</sup> 1 Chronicles 15:13

<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah 7:31

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 15:9

<sup>24</sup> Colossians 2:23



will, when we do what we want rather than what God appoints, when we do what Nadab and Abihu did and say, “Never mind what God has appointed, we will do it this way.” That’s will worship. It is when we say we will do what we want and God should accept it. That is will worship.

This means that our worship must be confined to what God has appointed. That means that not every gift, not every natural gift has to find expression in the worship of God. You know how it is in some situation in a church. Someone decides they are gifted in certain things and they expect a space to be made for them to use that gift in the service. So they are good at a particular instrument, well, it must be brought in to the worship and if enough people are gifted instrumentally you end up with an orchestra.

But what about if someone says, “Well, I am actually gifted in dance and drama and mime”? Well, apparently that all has to be brought in as well.

And someone else says, “Well, I am an artist.” And so we have artwork as well.

And someone says, “Well, I am a sculptor.” Well, that has to come in, too.

And, of course, that is the Roman Catholic view, that anything can be brought in. But we don’t accept that.

The question is: Did it enter into God’s house. Did he command it?

You say, “But in the Old Testament they used instruments of music.”

So they did in the ceremonial worship of the temple when they had priests and altars and sacrifices and incense. And who played the instruments? The Levites did, the assistant priests. It wasn’t just any Tom, Dick or Harry who happened to be gifted on a particular instrument said, “I am good at this instrument. I am good at it.” And therefore they made a place for him.

Not at all. During that temporary ceremonial worship God appointed the sons of Aaron to offer sacrifice. He appointed the Levites to act as assistants to the sons of Aaron the priests and to play musical instruments in the worship of the temple. The temple worship is now canceled. We do not have sacrifices, priesthood, altar, incense and we don’t have instruments of music either because it lacks biblical authority.

## **5. Where unauthorized worship leads.**

Where does it lead? If we say, “Well, we are not going to be confined to what the Bible says we should do in worship, where does it lead?”

A simple question. Who knows best what God is like? Who knows best what God is like? Well, the answer is obvious, isn’t it? God does. God does.

1 Corinthians chapter two and verse 11. “For what man knoweth the things of a man,

save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.”<sup>25</sup> God knows best about God.

So who is in the best position, then, to appoint ordinances that, if properly used by his blessing will lead to right thoughts of God? Whose ordinances are going to show us what God is really like? Yours, mine or God’s? Well, the answer is equally obvious. If God knows what God is like best, and he most assuredly does, then the ordinances which are going to lead us to right thoughts of God are God’s ordinances.

It is really actually very simple in the end, isn’t it? God does know best. You don’t know better than God how God is to be worshipped, neither do I? Neither does any man. Neither does any multitude of men.

God knows best. Of course he does. God’s ordinances, rightly used, lead to right views of God. Whereas man’s invented ordinances lead to wrong views of God. Of course they do. When we say, “Never mind what God appoints, this is what I want to do in the worship of God,” our invented ordinances will lead to our invented view of God. It will lead to idols, to false gods. Even if we don’t make a physical idol, if we invent the ordinances of worship in our minds, we will end up with our invented view of God. And that is why John Knox said that anything invented by the brain of man in the service of God is idolatry.” And he was right.

If we want to know what God is like we must do what God says in his worship. When we decide how we will worship we are ultimately deciding what we will worship.

And to the extent to which we depart from that which God has appointed, to that extent we will deviate from a biblical view of God himself.

The invented activity leads to an invented deity.

Well, just to apply this very briefly. Firstly, do you want what God has appointed? Do you want what God is appointed? No more, no less. Are you committed to worshipping God biblically according to the Scriptures and no other way or do you want to do your own thing? If so, why? Why? Why do you want to do something in worship that God has not appointed? There is a reason for it, isn’t there? There is a dissatisfaction with what God has appointed.

Is there a dissatisfaction with what God is really like? Is that what lies behind it? Because his ordinances show us what he is like. Why are you dissatisfied with what God has appointed? You ought to be asking yourself that question.

Secondly, relish the blessed restriction of our simple Reformed worship. Relish it.

You say, “Oh, you Reformed people. Your worship is so plain. You sing psalms. There

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<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:11

is no..." They say there is no music. What they mean is there is no instrumental music.

Good. Good. God hasn't appointed it, why should we want it? If we are to worship in spirit and in truth, we need to know that all the parts of our worship are according to God's mind and acceptable to him. We need to know that, rejoice in the simplicity of it.

This is freedom, freedom from human imposition, freedom from scraping around for new ideas, what to do in the worship of God. Rejoice in the fact that no one is trying to impose upon you what God has not. That is freedom. It is a blessed restriction when we own God as God because if we don't own God as God, we will end up owning someone else, someone else other than God. We will impose what they want.

You say, "Why not sing uninspired hymns? Why not?"

Well, because it has never been shown from the Scriptures that God has authorized it. That's why we sing only the psalms.

You say, "But doesn't the Scripture speak about psalms and hymns and spiritual songs?"

Indeed it does. In Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. But, you see, all three of those terms are used within Scripture of what we call more simply the biblical psalms. They are called hymns. They are called songs. And it has never been shown that the apostle Paul in those verses meant anything other than the contents of the Psalter.

And if we can't show that God has authorized anything but the psalms be sung, then that is what we sing.

People have guessed at it. They have said, "Oh, psalms are this, hymns are this, songs are this," or they thing this is... but they have never shown it. They have never proved it. Whereas there are abundant reasons for thinking that the three terms, psalms hymns and songs, all refer to the biblical psalms.

You know, in the titles of the psalms you have some called psalms, some called songs. Then you have this curious phrase, "On Neginoth," that word "on Neginoth" in the Greek version of the Old Testament it is the word "hymn."

In Psalm 76 in the Greek version of the Old Testament written in Hebrew and translated into Greek, quoted in the New Testament in its Greek form, Psalm 76 the words psalm, hymn and song all appear in the title. We stick to what we know is biblical.

Why should anybody complain about that? And when we try to bring our worship into closer conformity to Scripture don't complain. If you think the session is wrong, show us from the Scriptures. If you don't, accept it.

In Matthew 28 verse 18 to 20 the Lord Jesus Christ said to the apostles, verse 19:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.<sup>26</sup>

That is what the elders of the church must do, teach the people to observe whatsoever things I have commanded you, no more, no less.

Answer 50 of the Shorter Catechism tells us, “The Second Commandment requireth the receiving, observing and keeping pure and entire all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his Word. “ The ministers and elders and deacons of our church sign off to that. That is what they believe. That is what they commit themselves to, to keeping pure and entire. And the ministers and elders of the church are responsible to see that that is done not only for themselves, but in the public worship of God.

But then most basic of all there is one very basic application of this principle. If we are to worship God God’s way how as sinners are we to approach God at all? By whom are we, as sinners, to approach God? You see, this regulative principle comes down to the most basic questions of all. Shall we approach God through men or through the saints? Why not? Well, because we are to worship God God’s way. And he has told us, “There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> And that is the way we are to come to God in prayer and in all our ordinances we offer up worship acceptable by Christ Jesus.

The Lord Jesus Christ said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”<sup>28</sup> This is the most basic application of the regulative principle of all, the most basic application of the Second Commandment. You must talk to God God’s way. That ceremonial form of worship in the Old Testament was teaching them they had to come through God’s appointed feast, through God’s appointed sacrifice. And those sacrifices didn’t take away sin, but they were all meant to point to the coming Christ through whom sin would be taken away and in whom they must trust.

You cannot worship God at all until you come to God through Jesus Christ. Your whole life and all your outward worship is unacceptable to God until by his grace you trust in Jesus Christ to take away your sin, until you come to God through Christ as the one who bore the wrath of God upon sin.

You see, a Christian knows that they deserve damnation. Every real Christian knows that. A Christians knows that he is a sinner, that he is guilty by nature before God, that he deserves to be punished forever in hell. And every real Christian is resting and relying upon Jesus Christ the Savior as the one who bore the wrath of God, the punishment of sin

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew 28:19-20

<sup>27</sup> 1 Timothy 2:5

<sup>28</sup> John 14:6

in the place of sinners as the basis of his acceptance before God.

Thus, come to God this way. You cannot worship God until you come this way as a guilty sinner who acknowledges and knows that God is just and rightly condemns and punishes sin forever in hell, but that there is forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ. You must come to God through Christ without money and without price, without thinking you have anything acceptable to God that you can make yourself acceptable to God with. You must come through Jesus Christ and through him alone and say, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Luke 18:13